Basic Comma Help

Coordinating Conjunctions

For
And
Nor
But
Or
Yet
So

With the help of a FANBOY, a comma can link two independent clauses. Leave out the FANBOY, however, and your sentence will be a victim of the dreaded comma splice.

No   Sally works nights**,** she still makes it to school on time.

Yes   Sally works nights**, yet** she still makes it to school on time.

Note: If you are joining two independent clauses with any word other than a FANBOY, you must use a semicolon-comma combination. Example:

No   Sally works nights**, nevertheless,** she still makes it to class on time.

Yes   Sally works nights**; nevertheless,** she still makes it to class on time.

Nonrestrictive Elements

Nonrestrictive/nonessential elements are words, phrases, or clauses that are not vital to the meaning of the sentence. This extra information should be separated from the main sentence by a comma or commas. Thus, a good test to determine if an element is restrictive/essential is to omit the element and notice if the meaning of the sentence changes.

➤ Students **who take notes** have a higher retention of class lectures and discussions. [restrictive relative clause]

➤ Older students**, who often don't use Palm Pilots or laptops,** are frequently the best note takers. [nonrestrictive relative clause]

➤ The singer and songwriter **Lisa Moritz** has written a wonderful tribute to the beauty of the Kansas prairie. [restrictive appositive]

➤ Enthusiasts argue that the Boxster**, Porsche's entry-level car,** surpasses the 911 in developmental potential. [nonrestrictive appositive]
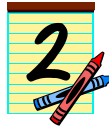
Introductory

A comma is placed after introductory elements that precede an independent clause. An introductory element can be a phrase, clause, or word(s).

➤ **When the weather is gloomy,** many people feel depressed. [introductory dependent clause]

➤ **After a long semester of studying,** I look forward to reading a book just for fun. [introductory prepositional phrase]

➤ **Stumbling over piles of dirty clothes,** I remember that I was supposed to pick up laundry detergent on the way home from school. [introductory participial phrase]

➤ **Safety being a major concern for drivers,** consumers will often pay extra for such safety devices, such as airbags and anti-lock brakes. [introductory absolute phrase]

➤ **For example,** nuts are high in fat, but the fat is mostly unsaturated fat. [introductory transitional phrase]

➤ **Furthermore,** nuts contain many important nutrients. [introductory conjunctive adverb]

➤ **To avoid high cholesterol, heart disease, and cancer,** many people eat nuts as a smart snack. [introductory infinitive phrase]

Note: When an introductory phrase is short (less than five words), some view the comma as optional if the sentence can be easily understood without the comma.

Top Ten Uses of a Comma

1. With coordinating conjunctions linking independent clauses
2. After introductory elements
3. With nonrestrictive elements
4. With coordinate adjectives
5. With items in a series
6. With transitional, parenthetical, and contrast expressions
7. With quotations
8. With names, places, and addresses
9. With dates and numbers
10. Words of direct address and tag sentences

Coordinate Adjectives

Coordinate adjectives are two or more adjectives that describe/modify the same noun or pronoun to an equal degree. They can be moved around and placed in different sequences. In addition, *and* can be placed between coordinate adjectives without creating an awkward sentence. Coordinate adjectives should be separated by a comma. Two or more adjectives that do not have these characteristics are called cumulative adjectives because of the way they build meaning from word to word. A comma should not separate cumulative adjectives.

➤ The **old, worn, yellowed book** remains my favorite. [coordinate adjectives]

➤ Each reader had a **unique literary interpretation** of the story. [cumulative adjectives]

5 Items in a Series

A series is a group of three or more words, phrases, or clauses that are equal in structure and value. In other words, all elements of the series must be parallel. A comma should separate each element in a series.

➢ The proceeds from the sale of the house should be divided equally between **Malia, Philip, and Sean**. [series of words]

➢ Cindy looked **under the bed, behind the sofa, and in her backpack** but still could not find her paycheck. [series of phrases]

➢ John recently realized **that his mother regrets him, his siblings distrust him, his wife resents him, and his children despise him**. [series of clauses]

6 Transitional, Parenthetical, & Contrast Expressions

Transitional expressions are words that move the reader from one idea to another. Parenthetical expressions are remarks that are not essential to the sentence. Contrast expressions show differences. All of these should be set off from independent clauses by commas.

➢ **For example,** the community center provides educational and social activities for youth every weeknight. [transitional expression]

➢ The meeting**, therefore,** is postponed until further notice. [transitional expression]

➢ **Similarly,** our Web site will utilize Java applications as part of the site entrance. [transitional expression/conjunctive adverb]

➢ Good food**, it seems to me,** makes any event more enjoyable. [parenthetical expression]

➢ We should always live frugally**, not just during the lean times**. [contrast expression]

7 Quotations

Explanatory words are words that introduce direct discourse. Explanatory words should be set off from quotations by commas.

➢ **Toni Morrison states,** "I don't wait to be struck by lightning and don't need certain slants of light in order to write."

➢ "I don't know anything about inspiration because I don't know what inspiration is; I've heard about it**," proclaims Faulkner,** "but I never saw it."

➢ "All you need is a room without any particular interruptions**," says John Dos Passos about writing.**

8 Names, Places, & Addresses

Use commas to separate an academic title from a name. Use commas to separate the names of cities and states from each other. Also, use commas to separate all elements of an address except the state and zip code.

➢ Linus Van Pelt**, Ph.D.**

➢ Linus Van Pelt**, Ph.D.,** is known for his theoretical writing on security blankets.

➢ Tomorrow, he will be traveling to **Kansas City, Missouri,** to speak.

➢ Dr. Van Pelt will hold a book signing party at the Writing Lab**, 5201 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64110,** in celebration of his newest book, *Why I Believe in the Great Pumpkin*.

9 Dates & Numbers

Use commas to separate the day from the date and the date from the year; however, when writing only the month and year, do not use a comma. Never separate the month and date with a comma.
Use commas to separate thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, etc., in whole numbers when numbers have five or more figures.

➢ Saturday, **July 26,** 1966

➢ July 1966

➢ The streets were empty on **Saturday, July 26, 1966,** in Britain.

➢ The BBC reports that **96,924** fans crammed the stadium on **26 July 1966** to witness England's brightest moment.
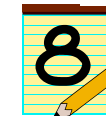
Note: Commas are not used with day-month-year sequences.

10 Words of Direct Address & Tag Sentences

Words of direct address name the person or group being spoken to and should be set off by a comma.
A tag sentence is a sentence that ends with a short statement or question. Tags often show uncertainty. The tag clause should be set off by a comma.

➢ **Gillian,** remember to call your granny. [direct address]

➢ Please raise your glass, **friends and family,** in a toast to the bride and groom. [direct address]

➢ The rain should stop soon, **I hope.** [tag sentence]

➢ The sky looks clearer, **doesn't it?** [tag sentence]